

CATALOGUES OF ART EXHIBITIONS ORGANIZED BY THE ARTS COUNCIL
OF GREAT BRITAIN REPUBLISHED ON MICROFICHE

Published on microfiche by:

Chadwyck-Healey Ltd
20 Newmarket Road
Cambridge CB5 8DT
England

Chadwyck-Healey, Inc
623 Martense Avenue
Teaneck NJ 07666
USA

Date of publication and production of master: 1982

Series: The purpose of this series is to make available those catalogues that have lasting interest through their text or their illustrations. Catalogues and cumulations of titles in the series are available from the publishers.

Serial numbers: Each title is identified by a three-part serial number. The first part of the serial number designates the sales list in which the title was first announced. The second part indicates the agent of publication, i.e. the museum, gallery or organisation that was responsible for the publication of the catalogue. The third part of the serial number is the number allotted to that title.

Copyright, microfiche edition: Arts Council of Great Britain and Chadwyck-Healey Ltd.

Location of original: Arts Council of Great Britain, 105 Piccadilly, London W1V 0AU.

Technical data: Producing laboratory: Chadwyck-Healey Microform Publishing Services, 10 North End, Bassingbourn, Cambs., England.

List 33

An Arts Council Photography Exhibition



Peter Henry Emerson 1856-1936

A Victorian Photographer of Life and Landscape in East Anglia



A Spring Idyl [Autogravure]
from *Pictures from Life in Field and Fen* 1887

INTRODUCTION

This is the Arts Council's second touring exhibition in a series devoted to the work of major individual figures in the history of photography in England. The exhibition also draws attention to the fact that there are many excellent collections of historical photographs outside London. In this case we have been fortunate enough to draw upon the collection of Emerson material in the Colman Library, Norwich Public Libraries. Valuable help and advice was forthcoming from Philip Hepworth, the City Librarian, who has himself made a study of Emerson's life and work.

We are once again indebted to The Royal Photographic Society for the loan of the majority of prints and without whose co-operation the exhibition would not have been possible.

We also thank Peter Turner who selected the final exhibition prints and was responsible for the preparation of this catalogue.

Norbert Lynton
Director of Exhibitions
Arts Council of Great Britain.

PETER HENRY EMERSON 1856-1936

During the 1880's the photographic scene in England was in a state of confusion — the unique qualities of the medium had been forgotten as Victorian photographers took up the role of 'Artist' and rushed to emulate genre painters with large composite prints telling moral tales, oil daubed and manipulated images that oozed sentimentality, and contrived and stage directed scenes 'from life'. When the discovery of photography was first announced in 1839 far-sighted observers had predicted the death of painting: 40 years later prominent photographers were begging to be considered as second rate painters. But the nature of photography as an independent medium had not been forgotten; in 1886 the inbred and clique-ridden photographic community was shattered by a hail of fiery invective from a Doctor of medicine and passionate amateur Peter Henry Emerson, who had taken it upon himself to champion a new aesthetic and fight for the recognition of photography as a medium of expression in its own right.

Emerson was born in 1856 in Cuba of an American father and an English mother. His father, a wealthy man, owned estates where the family lived until their son was eight when they returned to Massachusetts, their original home, for a brief period before coming to England where they settled. After studying at the recently founded Cranleigh school in Surrey, Emerson went up to King's College Cambridge where he began studies in medicine. During the latter years of his university career Emerson began to develop an interest in photography and in 1882 he joined the Photographic Society of Great Britain and exhibited his work for the first time. From this he gained sufficient encouragement to lead to a deeper involvement in the medium, and for the following three years he studied and photographed.

Believing photography to be an art form, Emerson set about acquiring a knowledge of the history of art, while meeting as many notable painters and photographers as he could. As a man of science his discoveries horrified him, for his researches led him to conclude that the foundation of fine-art was 'taste' and lacked both principles and reason. Shock laid upon shock as he decided that photography, disowning its own tradition, had assumed the same mantle as the other arts and was following, sheeplike, the nonsensical rules and regulations laid down by critics who felt their 'taste' to be above others. To compound the disorder, the leading photographer of the day Henry Peach Robinson

was preaching the virtues of this appalling state of affairs, glorying in a painterly approach to photography and adopting the visual style of a generation of painters who, as far as Emerson was concerned, did not even warrant the title of artists. A man of great energy, he decided to right this wrong and, single-handed if need be, set photography back on its true path by establishing a sound and scientific basis for the medium.

Among his many acquaintances was James McNeil Whistler, a fellow expatriot American and a painter of the 'Naturalistic' school whose cool and logical understanding of the true basis of Art left a deep impression on the young photographer. 'Nature' as reality was obviously a basic principle of photography — the recording of things as they are, without adornment or embellishment. But for Emerson, with his medical background, this was not enough — he demanded a scientific backing to his search for pure photography.

He found it in the writings of Professor H. von Helmholtz who proposed a theory of vision and perception in his book 'Psychological Optics'. Thus armed with his new found knowledge of 'natural' vision and 'natural' photography, Emerson began his all out attack on the Establishment.

During the time that he had spent on these researches, Emerson had moved to Southwold in Norfolk where he befriended a little known but highly articulate painter of the Naturalistic school, Thomas F. Goodall. Goodall's understanding of the relationship that existed between photography and the other visual arts seemed a touchstone in Emerson's development as a photographer and together they worked on a portfolio of pictures 'Life and Landscape on the Norfolk Broads' which combined photographs of the wild, sweeping East Anglian landscape with documentary style studies of farm labourers and marsh men at work. The portfolio was published in 1886 — direct and honest, the pictures seemed incongruous against the posed and contrived efforts of the high 'Pictorialists'.

This portfolio was the first of a volley of weapons that Emerson was to launch at his fellow photographers: magazine articles, letters, more pictures, lectures — the photographic world quaked at the strength of his continued assaults. Two camps rapidly arose, those for and those against 'Naturalistic' photography, however, Henry Peach Robinson,

the high priest of 'Pictorialism' continued as the foremost exponent of the art-photography that the 'Naturalists' so despised, and his teachings continued to be spread through his popular book 'Pictorial effect in Photography'.

This work, originally produced in 1866, laid down rigid rules on composition and the constitution of photography as an art-form while opposing all that Emerson held dear. 'A great deal can be done and very beautiful pictures made by a mixture of the real and the artificial in a picture' the reader was told, while being warned that the photographer's duty was to 'elevate his subject, to avoid awkward forms and to correct the unpicturesque'.

Deciding that he must fight fire with fire, Emerson resolved to write a book that would instruct the would-be photographer in all that was necessary to produce photographs from nature, truthful and unmanipulated images that would stand alone as examples of photography as a unique and independent fine-art.

Work on the book began in 1888 and 'Naturalistic Photography' appeared the following year. Its effect was astounding, for in stressing a simple, straightforward and honest approach, Emerson had swept aside decades of misdirection, and in publishing such radical concepts he created a stir that had far-reaching effects. The book offered strong comment against the attitudes of the 'Pictorialists': 'avoid prettiness — the word looks much like pettiness and there is little difference between them.' 'Do not call yourself an 'artist-photographer' and make 'artist-painters' and 'artist-sculptors' laugh; call yourself a 'photographer' and wait for artists to call you brother'. Emerson was dogmatic and forthright and 'Naturalistic Photography' made the opposing factions fight even more fiercely, particularly over his theories on focussing. Taking Professor von Helmholtz's teaching on the lack of definition in human peripheral vision to its final stage, Emerson advised his readers to place the lens slightly out of focus as 'nothing in nature has a hard outline, but everything is seen against something else, and its outlines fade gently ... In this mingled decision and indecision ... lies all the charm and mystery of nature'.

'Healthy human eyes never saw any part of a scene out of focus' roared the outraged Robinson from the pages of the photographic press. Emerson, who by now was well established with a growing band of

followers including many prominent photographers, retorted with disdain 'I have yet to learn that any one statement or photograph of Mr H.P. Robinson has ever had the slightest effect upon me except as a warning of what not to do'.

The battle raged on until December 1890 when Emerson made a dramatic announcement: 'A great painter' whom he refused to identify had convinced him that he had been wrong — photography was not an art! In a brave if rather melodramatic gesture typical of his earlier pronouncements, Emerson produced a black edged pamphlet 'The Death of Naturalistic Photography'. He explained 'the limitations of photography are so great that, though the results may and sometimes do give a certain aesthetic pleasure, the medium must always rank the lowest of all the arts . . .' 'No differential analysis can be made, no subduing of parts, no emphasis — save by dodging, and that is not pure photography. Impure photography is merely a confession of limitations.'

But despite his own renunciation, Emerson could not change the excitement and conviction that his fresh thinking and ideals had brought to photography. For in producing work of this kind in a period when the medium was languishing in a backwater of sickly sentimentality he brought about a minor revolution. And in proclaiming that photographic art and reality could not be separated, his minor revolution became a major one. Without doubt, Peter Henry Emerson had a seminal influence on photography. Although his theoretical approach to photography was, perhaps, a little curious, the storm that 'Naturalistic Photography' caused coupled with Emerson's ceaseless battles and missionary zeal set in motion a remarkable chain of events that altered the course of the development of photographic aesthetics. His championing of the medium and his understanding of its basic strengths laid the foundation for a new concept — photography as an honest and unsentimental record of what is, revealed as a fine-art through the sensitivity of the photographer.

Peter Turner 1973

EMERSON'S TECHNIQUES

The Victorian photographer had at his disposal, and made great use of, a wide variety of processes and print making techniques. Although many of them depended on the intervention of the photographer, and demanded a high degree of manipulation, both practices which Emerson despised, with typical thoroughness he investigated all before deciding on two basic methods of reproducing his images.

The first, which he used for his portfolio *Life and Landscape on the Norfolk Broads* was the platinotype or platinum print. Basically similar to the bromide (silver) process used today, platinotypes depended on platinum as their light sensitive agent and are characterised by a slightly metallic appearance and soft contrast. The platinum print was in use from the early 1870's, mainly by more serious photographers who admired its beauty, gentle tones and great permanence. During the First World War, platinum became so expensive that the paper ceased to be commercially available.

The work involved in producing all the prints for the edition of 150 copies of *Life and Landscape on the Norfolk Broads* led Emerson to search for an equally fine but less complex method of producing prints in quantity for subsequent portfolios. He found it in the *Autogravure* or photo-etching as produced by a Mr. Colls of the Typographic Etching Company of London. This process used on acid etched copper plate and was capable of giving up to 3000 impressions of a single image. Under Emerson's personal supervision, a carbon print negative was taken from his original negative and laid on the copper sheet to form a resist. An acid solution was then poured onto the copper, etching away the metal in proportion to the tones of the negative, shadows being deepest and therefore holding most ink when print making took place.

Although a mechanical process, in the hands of a skilled and sensitive craftsman, the reproductions produced by autogravure were absolutely faithful to the original negative. Emerson was well pleased with the results he obtained, and even though not purely photographic, he recommended the process as 'perfect for reproducing negatives taken from nature'.



In the Barley-Harvest (Suffolk) [Autogravure]
from *Pictures of East Anglian Life 1888*

BOOK LIST

The following books deal with Emerson's place in the history of British photography —

- 'A Concise History of Photography' by H. & A. Gernsheim, Thames & Hudson, 1965 p.169
- 'The History of Photography' by H. & A. Gernsheim, Thames & Hudson 1969 pp 456-460
- 'The History of Photography' by Beaumont Newhall, Secker & Warburg 1972 pp 97-99
- 'Masters of Photography' by Beaumont & Nancy Newhall, Castle Books, New York 1958 pp 54-59
- 'Great Photographers' Life Library of Photography, Time Life Books 1972 pp 100-103
- 'Album' Issue no.2 Album (Photographic) Ltd., 1970 pp 2-10

The books listed below are all original publications by Emerson or modern reprints

Naturalistic Photography 1889

The Death of Naturalistic Photography 1890

Pictorial Books

Life and Landscape on the Norfolk Broads (with T.F. Goodall) 1886

Idylls of the Norfolk Broads 1886

Pictures from Life in Field and Fen 1888

Pictures of East Anglian Life 1888

Wild Life on a Tidal Water (with T.F. Goodall) 1890

On English Lagoons 1893

Birds, Beasts and Fishes of the Norfolk Broadland 1895

Marsh Leaves 1895

Modern Reprints

'Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art' by P.H. Emerson, Amphoto (New York), 1973 — facsimile reprint of 1890 edition

'Photographers on Photography' edited by Nathan Lyons, Prentice-Hall Inc., New Jersey, 1966. Science and Art, a paper presented by P.H. Emerson at the Camera Club Conference, 26th March 1889, pp 60-66.



Poling the Marsh Hay [Platinum]
from *Life and Landscape on the Norfolk Broads* 1886